Interview with David A. Korn

The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs Oral History Project

AMBASSADOR DAVID A. KORN

Interviewed by: Charles Stuart Kennedy

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Q: It is December 11, 1990. This is an interview with Ambassador David Korn on behalf of the Association for Diplomatic Studies and I am Charles Stuart Kennedy.

I wonder if you would give me a little idea of where you came from, your background, before we get into the Foreign Service side.

KORN: I grew up in Joplin, Missouri and attended the University of Missouri. I served in the army during the Korean War, but I was in Europe—Germany and France.

Q: What type of work were you doing?

KORN: I was in communications in Paris, actually. I was demobbed from the army in France and stayed on there and went to the Institute de Politique in Paris. I came back and went to Johns Hopkins.

Q: What were you taking when you were at the University of Missouri?

KORN: Journalism.

Q: What prompted you towards the international side?

KORN: That is hard to say. It just seemed to come gradually. Well, military service in Europe, I suppose as well as the schooling that I did there. I did international relations.

Q: When did you come into the Foreign Service?

KORN: I came in in September 1957.

Q: And I wonder if you could characterize a little bit...you had a class when you came in?

KORN: Yes. I graduated from SAIS in June, 1957 and went to work for what was then called ICA and now is AID for three months until the Foreign Service appointment came through. I came in in the class with Peter Sebastian, and Peter Burgess—a class of 26.

Q: Can you characterize the class as all white male...

KORN: The class was all white male except for two women. Phyllis Oakley was in the class. She married and had to leave.

Q: Your first assignment was to Paris. You served there from '57 to '60. What were you doing there?

KORN: I was a political officer. There was supposed to be a rotation program at the beginning with junior officers rotating throughout the embassy. I started out in the political section working for Bill Whitman who was in charge of everything beyond Africa—everything else outside of Europe, African, Latin America and Middle Eastern and so on. Mr. Graham, who was supposed to be doing Africa fell ill so I stayed on and did his job during the entire time I was there.

Q: This was the time when things were really beginning to hop in Africa wasn't it? From '57 to '60. From the viewpoint of the embassy in Paris how was this whole process looked at? Particularly on the French side.

KORN: The Ambassador, who was Amory Houghton, did not look favorably upon it at all. I recall being called in by him once and being asked whether I felt this was a good thing. He obviously hoped I would say it wasn't—all these countries becoming independent. But we proceeded to do our reporting. The ambassador did not try to interfere. It was clear that the French Territories were moving towards independence. There was no reporting required that would run counter to that.

Q: Was it people saying that we had bigger things to worry about like NATO and this is just going to...or was there a feeling that the African countries were not up to it.

KORN: I am not sure where Ambassador Houghton's attitude came from. I was just a very junior officer, I was given no overview or was aware of the embassy's concerns. My focus was on Africa. I got to know all of the African students, many of whom eventually attained important positions in their countries. I also got to know the African leaders who were in Paris. My reporting was all on Africa and there was no attempts to influence it.

Q: Were you dealing at the lower level with French officials at the Quai d'Orsay?

KORN: I went over to the Foreign Ministry from time to time. The relations there were handled by Whitman or other senior officers.

Q: Give us a little feel for this time. A junior officer in Paris reporting on African affairs would essentially seek out African representatives or...

KORN: Student leaders. There was a large West African student population there as well as some from North Africa. Each of these territories had governments and the heads and other leaders visited periodically. Some of them were members of the French National Assembly. I would present myself and talk to them. I would also try to assess French attitude towards the territories by getting to know the journalists working on Africa.

Q: I guess Algeria was out of your purview, wasn't it? It was part of metropolitan France at that time.

KORN: In Algeria the war was going on but I didn't work on that.

Q: Were you there when the then Senator Kennedy got up in the Senate and talked about looking again at Algeria and all that?

KORN: Possibly, but...

Q: Later it became sort of a major issue. Obviously, working on your French you were sent to Beirut. Was that right?

KORN: Yes, that is right. Armin Meyer asked me to go with him to Beirut to be his interpreter in French there—the number two in a two-person political section there.

Q: That gives an idea of the size of our interest in Beirut at the time.

KORN: Yes, well, embassies were smaller then.

Q: What was the situation in Beirut '61-'63?

KORN: Those were really the very best years for Lebanon. The civil war of 1958 had passed and with the American intervention things had calmed down. General Chehab had been elected president. Lebanon had settled into a certain relative stability. There was, just after I arrived, a coup attempt by some extremists—a group of pro-Syrian officers in the army. But Syria did not have a strong government at that time so it wasn't considered a major threat to independence. The major threat was considered to come from Egypt. Nasser's followers were very active and vocal and it considered if anything happened, Egypt would move to bring Lebanon into the Egyptian-Syrian union...

Q: That was the UAR?

KORN: The UAR was begun in 1958 and had collapsed just before I got there. In any case there was still a question as to whether it had collapsed really or whether it was going to be renewed. Egypt was the main actor there. But things were pretty quiet in Beirut. Amory was a very active ambassador and effective one. My impression is that his predecessor had stuck pretty much to the Christian community and their contacts and reflected the views of the Christian community. But Amory believed in reaching out and being in touch with the Moslem community and the Druze. He did this and I think he contributed a great deal to bringing the stability along. He had a very good relationship with Chehab who felt it was important to bring the Americans in and be close to them. In fact, he owed his presidency to Robert Murphy. Murphy came in as the so-called mediator in the Lebanon civil war after the marines had landed and in effect engineered the election of Chehab, so he tended to look in the direction of the American embassy.

Q: At that time, looking at it, if somebody were to ask you "whither Lebanon?", how did you see things going there?

KORN: Perhaps this reflects a certain hindsight, it is hard to say, but I think, as I recall, I had the feeling at the time, that this was a very fragile edifice and was just a conglomeration of essentially warring groups. And even though from '61 to '63, things were quiet and the place was prosperous, still it was clear that they didn't work together and that there was a great potential for the place to split apart. And of course that is what happened.

Q: Yes. Did you have access to various elements? How did you work as a political officer?

KORN: I had as much access as I wanted but never had the time to exploit it because I spent a great deal of time running around with Amory. He took me with him on almost all of his calls, except when there was someone who spoke only Arabic, which was very rare. People either spoke French or English and on those calls I would go along with him and come back and write the cables. If there was someone who only spoke Arabic he would

take Dick Parker with him. Since he was so active, I did not really have a lot of time on my own.

Q: Did this inspire you...I note that in 1963 you left and went into Arabic training. Is that right?

KORN: Yes. That had been the intention anyway and I had applied for Arabic training before Beirut came up. I believe I had been accepted before I went to Beirut. However, Ambassador Meyer came along and asked me to come with him to the embassy. If I recall correctly, I said that I would, but didn't want to stay longer than two years because I wanted to attend the language program.

Q: What pushed you towards Arabic.

KORN: I am not quite sure. It seemed like an interesting career and I found languages interesting.

Q: You were in Tangier a year?

KORN: I was in Tangier for a little over a year.

Q: How did you find the training? I have heard some people saying that that particular school was not the greatest.

KORN: It was terrible. The school was set up on a mistaken premise in the first place. The premise was that you had a school in Beirut, which was for Eastern spoken Arabic. You learned Lebanese Arabic, which was a little different but basically the same as the Arabic spoken in Baghdad, Damascus or Saudi Arabia and different from Egyptian still. A wide range there. So you have a school for Western spoken Arabic but nobody seemed to bother to inquire whether there was any such thing as Western spoken Arabic and there isn't. There is Moroccan Arabic, there is Algerian Arabic, and there is Tunisian Arabic, and there is Mauritanian Arabic and they are all different. They are different in their verb

structure and in their vocabulary as well. This was one mistaken premise. They should have simply taught modern, classical Arabic.

The other problem was that the school was new and the director, Harley Smith, was interested in other things—I guess that is the kindest thing to say about it. There were a lot of night clubs around Tangier and he spent a great deal of time in those. He would get into the office about ten o'clock in the morning. Classes began about, I think, about 8:30 or something. The Moroccan instructor figured if he, Smith, wasn't there then he didn't have to be there and work. So it was a very poorly run school. I don't know what happened afterwards, but those of us who learned anything, learned it simply on our own.

Q: How did you? What did you do?

KORN: I went out and found people to talk with and was able to develop a fairly good fluency in Moroccan Arabic.

Q: About how many students were there at that time?

KORN: I guess there were 8 or 10.

Q: You went from there to where? To Mauritania?

KORN: I went to Mauritania in 1964, but was there little less than a year. I got sick there and returned to Washington.

Q: How long had Mauritania been independent at that time?

KORN: Theoretically it had been independent since 1961. However, the government had only moved to Nouakchott in 1963.

Q: Was the embassy still on a trailer...?

KORN: It was a little quiet town with so-called French technicians around. The Mauritanians were mostly bedouin Arabs. They had built what they called villas for Ministers housing, but most of them camped out in the backyard. The climate was much more comfortable sleeping in a tent. It was a cozy, comfortable little place. There was nothing really going on at the time. This was before the Western Sahara situation; it was still in Spanish hands.

Q: Did you have the feeling that you were just there to show that the Americans were there?

KORN: Well, this was an embassy that was obviously set up because we had an embassy everywhere. For me it was an experience because I was all of a sudden Charg# d'affaires for a long period. When I arrived the first ambassador had been named. I arrived in the Fall, this was mid-October, in 1964, and was Charg# until the end of April. So even in a small place being Charg# gave one a certain feeling of importance.

Q: Did we have anything to say to them? Were we deferring to the French or were we acting as a form of tutor in a way...?

KORN: The Mauritanians were looking to the United States for aid. The government was very friendly towards the West. Mokhtar Ould Daddah was the president and was a great friend of the French. We were not playing any independent role there. We were simply having a presence there. If anything, we were helping the French shore up a pro-Western position.

Q: You fell ill and left, is that right?

KORN: I went back on home leave and then stayed in Washington. That is when I worked for Kurt Moore on the Arabian Peninsula Desk.

Q: You were there from '65 to '67. In this period, what were our interests in Saudi Arabia would you say?

KORN: Oil was not the major interest. Although oil was important, the Saudis were important oil producers, but it wasn't something we had an essential stake in. As I recall that period it was simply one of managing relations. There was some activity with Kuwait, there was the beginning of the civil war which was—I guess the civil war was the main thing that was going on there. Egypt was involved on the Republican side, the Saudis were on the side of the monarchy. When Kennedy came in, he made a big effort to draw closer to Nasser, but after Kennedy was killed Johnson did not pursue this and increasingly Nasser and the United States came into conflict over various things—over the Congo and Yemen. The Egyptians were seen, quite rightly so, as threatening our interests in the region.

Q: I think it was Dick Parker who was saying that there was almost a chemical reaction between Nasser and Johnson. In Near Eastern Affairs did you sort of feel this?

KORN: No, not really. But it was quite clear that Nasser was looked upon as the bad boy.

Q: Did you see the troops that Nasser sent? Were they there when you were dealing with Saudi Arabia?

KORN: There were reports...

Q: And also some supplies to possible rebels by Egyptians?

KORN: Not by the Egyptians. The government was supported by the Egyptians. The Saudis were supplying the rebels with money and arms.

We had a big crisis right before the Six-Day War. The Egyptians, I know Parker has talked about this, seized some American AID people and the Consulate in Taif was stormed and

all sorts of documents were there in side. The AID office hadn't even locked their safes when they went out to lunch. This was resolved after the war.

Q: Were you there during the Six Day War? Could you give us a feel of what you were doing? This was between Israel, Egypt, Syria and Jordan.

KORN: I have a very foggy recollection of that time. The only thing I recall is that I felt very strongly that war was coming after Nasser closed the Straits of Tiran— there was going to be a conflict. But beyond that I don't recall very much in detail.

Q: Was there any concern that the Saudis might enter in at that time?

KORN: The Saudis cut off oil at the time of the war in response to Nasser's charge that the United States had been involved in an air attack on Egypt, but it didn't produce an impact. At that time the United States was about 90 percent self-sufficient in oil and the rest of what we got we got from Venezuela. The Saudi oil cut off had virtually no impact. Even in Western Europe it had very little impact. This situation, of course, became very different after the 1973 war. But in 1967 the oil cut off had so little impact that the Saudis and other Arab oil producing states were very happy to go back to producing oil within a few months afterwards.

Q: It is interesting to think about how within a 5 or 6 year period oil went from being way down on the imperative list to suddenly being a major item.

KORN: Yes, during the time that I was on the Arabian Peninsula Desk it was less oil than strategic position that we were interested in.

Q: Speaking of strategic positions. I wonder if you could give us a feel for how we viewed the “Soviet menace” at that time in the Near East.

KORN: I can't tell you from the time, but I know from later on. It was unquestioned at the time that there was a threat from the Soviet Union and we had to maintain and shore-up our positions in all these countries.

Q: You mean that the Arab world was fragile and could succumb to indigenous communist movements?

KORN: My view of things while I was on the Arabian Desk I think was more narrow than that. I was the desk officer for the Arabian Peninsula working under an officer in charge of the Arabian Peninsula who was working under an Office Director for Near Eastern Affairs.

Q: I served in Dhahran some years earlier, from '58 to '60, and one of the big concerns was that there were so many Palestinians who were involved in the Saudi infrastructure and military forces. It was felt this seemed to be an unstable force which could become attracted to Nasserism and from Nasserism it could almost be equated at one point to communism. Was that thought process still going?

KORN: I am sure it was, I just don't recall.

Q: You made an interesting switch. I can't think of anyone who had both Arabic and Hebrew studies.

KORN: The way that came about was that, I think it was Ned Schaffer who was a personnel officer at that time and came around looking for somebody who had studied Arabic and served in the Arab world to go to Israel and study Hebrew and serve in the embassy there. This was a new program. There had been one or two officers in the embassy in Israel who had been trained in Arabic there, but nobody who had experience from the other side. So they were looking for that and nobody in NEA would touch this because it was considered sudden death for your career. If you went to Israel and served there you were contaminated as far as the Arabs were concerned. While I was in Beirut I went down to Israel on my own and spent a couple of weeks touring around, and I found it

a very interesting place. So when this came up I thought it was a magnificent opportunity. So I put my name in. Nobody else put his name in. So I went to Israel. FSI did not have a program for Hebrew set up at that time. I simply went into a school for immigrants and studied Hebrew there on my own for three months before going to work in the embassy. It was a fantastic experience.

Q: How did you find Hebrew after Arabic? Was it difficult?

KORN: Hebrew was not very hard really. I didn't find it very hard because they are both Semitic languages. They are much more different than French from Italian, or English from German, but still the basic structure of the languages are the same and there are a number of words that are similar. Arabic was a fine preparation for Hebrew.

Q: Did you find going to the immigrant school also an experience you could draw on later on as a political officer?

KORN: Well, it gave me a much better appreciation, I think, for the place and the people than if I had studied Hebrew in Washington. This was the very best time as far as the Israelis were concerned. They had just had this war and unbelievable victory so there was launched a kind of momentum and a time of great optimism.

Q: I see. You were there from '67 to '71. First, what were you doing at the embassy after you completed the language?

KORN: I went into the political section first of all and at the end of '69 when Stackhouse, who was head of the political section left, I moved up into his job.

Q: The ambassador was Walworth Barbour. He had been there for a long time hadn't he? How would you describe his operating style?

KORN: Barbour had been there since 1962 and he was in ill health. He was a very intelligent man, but by the time I started working for the embassy in 1968 he was

increasingly out of commission. He came in the office around 10:00 o'clock and left around l:00. If I were to accompany him to the Foreign Ministry some times, I would write the cable. But he left the running of the embassy to Owen Zurhellen who was a very active, energetic, and capable officer. Barbour did not take a great hand in things. He was known to be very pro-Israeli, very much inclined to make the Israeli case in Washington, but also, I think, the American case to the Israelis when that was required.

Q: Were you working with internal politics?

KORN: At first, yes. Afterwards, I became involved in the external affairs as well.

Q: Those were the days when the Labor Party was in power. How did we get along with it?

KORN: Oh, I think they were the days of closest collaboration between the United States and Israel. Before the Six-Day War relations had not been bad but there had been a conscious effort for quite some time to keep a distance from Israel. After the '67 war, that largely disappeared. We didn't start giving Israel massive aid until during and after the 1973 war, but the program of supplying arms, selling arms, particularly aircraft, to Israel began at that point after the 1967 war.

So relations were very close and there were various peace efforts going on at the time. Joe Sisco had negotiations with the Soviets. There were disagreements. The Israelis were very unhappy over our talking with the Soviets about a peace settlement. But basically collaboration was quite close.

Q: Did you find the Israelis easy to talk to re political subjects?

KORN: Yes, very. It was a very interesting place. You never went to a dull dinner party or after dinner party, or whatever. Unlike a great many diplomatic posts where there was nothing to learn or say, Israel was a place where you could find interesting and lively conversation.

Q: Did you find yourself in a position of trying to give the Arab view to people since you had served in Beirut, Mauritania and on the Saudi desk? Were you placed in the Arab expert field by both the Israelis and the embassy?

KORN: No, on the contrary. I had the feeling that the Israelis, at that time anyway, were very much interested in meeting and talking to somebody who had been on the Arab side and did not regard you with any particular suspicion for having been there, which, of course, is entirely the contrary if you were on the other side.

Q: This was a time too when the Israelis felt they could sit back, things were going their way and eventually the Arabs would come around, wasn't it?

KORN: Yes, they thought that for a while.

Q: At the embassy in Tel Aviv you get these reflections of each embassy thinking well if you are in opposing camps that all those people in the Cairo Interest Section there or in Syria and the like don't understand and are too biased or anti-Israeli or something like this. Was there any of this feeling?

KORN: In NEA I think the embassy at Tel Aviv was not in the mainstream. There wasn't anyone in Syria because we didn't have representation at that time, but from the embassy in Beirut we got a lot of cables that seemed to place the blame for everything on Israel. There were different points of view reflected from reporting from Beirut and Cairo than from Tel Aviv. No question about it.

Q: At that time there was the feeling that Israel had proven itself in the Six-Day War and was here to stay. It was not an iffy case of a country...

KORN: That was very definitely so.

Q: Did you have any contact with any of the Israeli leaders? Can you characterize any of the meetings?

KORN: I was not at the level where I could deal directly with Dayan or Eban, or Golda Meir, but I was in meetings with them frequently while accompanying somebody—the ambassador, Sisco, George Ball, etc. I often took the notes of the meeting.

Q: Was there the feeling that the Israelis were doing a number on the many delegations that came through? Did the embassy feel it had to put things a little more in perspective? Sometimes this is not only true of Israel, there are a lot of countries where...

KORN: Well, certainly that was not the Barbour view of things. At that time things were different than now. I don't think the administration felt there was a conflict between our views and the Israelis.

Q: So there really wasn't a feeling that we thought we might be going in one direction, while the Jewish lobby as well as those who were interested in Israel and the United States, were pushing us in another direction.

KORN: Things were still under the shadow of the 1967 war. The feeling was that we had some moral commitment to the Israelis. We left them to go alone. We didn't fulfill on this commitment. We arranged the withdrawal from Sinai in 1967 and the UN forces and all that and gave some commitments there but they were not hard and fast. When Nasser sent his forces into the Sinai in 1967 and closed the Straits of Tiran, the Johnson Administration flailed around. It was too heavily committed in Vietnam to be able to mount a real effort in the Middle East. Then finally the Israelis took things into their own hands. This had a lasting impact—at least for several years. It really meant that the United States was not pushing the Israelis very hard on anything.

Q: One last question on Israel. How about the Likud? Was this a factor or was it sort of peripheral?

KORN: At that time it wasn't the Likud, it was the Herut, which was a liberal bloc and were a minority. They were viewed as a nuisance but not of great consequence. And this is another reason why Israel and the United States did not have any big clash because the prevailing views of the Labor Party were for the most part liberal and broad minded. Settlements in the occupied territories were not an issue at that time because the Labor Party was not advocating them. The greater Israel move was beginning to develop but it was not something that the government, itself, was encouraging. In fact it was doing its best to break it. Begin was viewed as a kind of nuisance, but not a serious threat to the Israeli government or a problem for the United States. And had it not been for the '73 war and the losses of the '73 war the situation might have continued.

Q: By the way, did you find your study of Hebrew paid off there?

KORN: Very much so, yes. You can get along perfectly well in Israel in English, but what goes on inside Israeli society is very important and, of course, all the newspapers were in Hebrew except for the Jerusalem Post which was in English and geared to the foreign community. The Israeli press reported on everything that went on in the country. The deepest darkest diplomatic secrets would appear in the Hebrew press. You could read them in telegrams and then see them in the Hebrew press. But often they were in the middle of something that was totally off base. But you could read along and see a lot of information about reports that were absolutely false and right in the middle would be a couple of sentences reflecting what was going on in the diplomatic discussions between the United States and Israel. In any case you could circulate much better in society with Hebrew.

Q: You came back to Washington.

KORN: Yes, I was Office Director for Lebanon, Jordan, Syria and Iraq.

Q: You were there from '72 to '75. What were our concerns in this period?

KORN: I arrived in the year before the 1973 war. In Syria we had no representation. In Iraq we had just, in the summer of 1972, opened a very small interest section because Iraq was just beginning to have some contact with the West after having severed everything—you know, after the 1967 war, the Baath coup came after that. Lebanon was in turmoil as a result of the '67 war and in Jordan there was always a potential for instability. The main interest of the administration at that time was keeping King Hussein in Jordan and keeping Jordan stable.

Q: When was the Black September business?

KORN: December 7, 1971. Hussein had thrown the Palestinian out and they were moving into Lebanon and beginning to destabilize Lebanon. The war turned everything upside down. My memory of it was spending about a month of in the dark working on the task force—going in before light and leaving after dark. Through the larger part of '74 my activity was working on what you might call the peace process. We re-established a presence in Syria and worked on the disengagement agreements between Israel and Egypt and Israel and Syria. There were also plans for a disengagement agreement between Israel and Jordan, although Jordan had not taken part in the fighting. This agreement never took place although there was considerable work on the planning of it.

Q: During a good part of this time Joseph Sisco was the Assistant Secretary for Near Eastern Affairs wasn't he?

KORN: Yes. However, it was at the end of '73, I believe, that he became Under Secretary for Political Affairs.

Q: In the time you were working, how would you describe his way of operating and his effectiveness?

KORN: Sisco was very, very effective. He was a consummate bureaucratic player. He knew how to manipulate the bureaucracy. He was a very dynamic personality. There are all sorts of stories about him. Once during a snow storm he commandeered a snow plough to get to the State Department. He was a very astute operator.

Q: Did you find that in a way even though someone can be difficult, if you are working for somebody who is effective within the State Department is this a little bit heady?

KORN: I never had any trouble with Sisco. Others people may have.

Q: How did we view developments in Iraq and Syria at that time?

KORN: Well, again, the major problem we had with Syria up until the war was that the Syrians had arrested an American military attach# assigned to Jordan. This fellow decided to drive up from Amman to Beirut via Damascus. That was something people did during that time, but there was some sort of fighting or shooting there across the border between the Israelis and the Syrians. The Syrians arrested this fellow and kept him in jail for a couple of months. This was the main thing that occupied us re Syria—to get him out of jail. We finally did and then the Syrians arrested some poor American kid who wandered over the border. So our main problems with the Syrians was trying to get Americans out of jail until 1973. After '73 when our relations were re-established things turned to a higher diplomatic level, but we had no diplomacy with Syria whatsoever up until the end of 1973.

Q: And then Iraq...

KORN: Iraq was very much off in a corner. They were very extreme in their views of the United States and Arab-Israeli problem. There was no talking going on. Secretly, I had no direct knowledge of it, but was aware of it, we were helping the Kurds in their struggles

via Iran. The Iraqis wanted to have a low level contact. They wanted to have a man in Washington so had to accept somebody in Baghdad, but there was no real diplomatic dealings, etc.

Q: And in Lebanon we saw a disintegrating situation?

KORN: No. We weren't as attentive as we should have been at that time to the break down of the Lebanese system that was going on. We were more worried about the Palestinians and the increasing role they were playing. We didn't perceive the depth of the problem.

Q: The peace process was sort of a peripheral role...

KORN: I had some part in it. I went down to Syria to prepare for Kissinger's first visit there, and was the first official American into Syria since 1967. I went to Geneva to the peace conferences which took place in December of '73 and did some work on the delegation there. Henry Kissinger was handling all of this. Sisco and Atherton were part of the process and they brought the rest of us in to a considerable degree, but most of this was Henry Kissinger's show.

Q: In Syria when you went were they uncomfortable dealing with Americans again?

KORN: They were very gracious. After I had had to deal indirectly with them over the two cases of arrested Americans, particularly the military attach# who was tortured, I didn't have a very good image of the Syrians, but they were polite to me. They wanted Kissinger to come. So they collaborated with the person who was sent there to set up a meeting. The atmosphere of the meeting was very good. Kissinger and the Syrians at the arrival dinner told each other dirty jokes and made lots of puns, there were lots of laughs. The thing that I remember most about Kissinger was when walking into a hall off to the side where the Americans went in, Kissinger stood there and looked out the window and said, “It is my destiny that brings me here.” And I think that is the way that Kissinger saw himself.

Q: You made not a complete geographical switch but you left your desk job to suddenly go to Calcutta as Consul General.

KORN: It was sort of a two year time out. I wanted to get away from the Arabs and Israelis and see another part of the world. And that was what I did. There wasn't much going on in Calcutta. Well, I was there during the time of the emergency and the cancellation of democracy by Indira Gandhi. She shut India's system of democracy down the week after I arrived and reopened it about a month before I left and then was thrown out of office.

Q: Did that effect your work at all?

KORN: Oh yes. The country was thrown into chaos and Indians were reluctant to talk to Americans. The United States was under suspicion. We had an AID program and all that. They would come to the Consulate for receptions, etc. but they wouldn't talk.

Q: You were feeling you were really in a repressive regime at the time.

KORN: Yes. It wasn't a blood thirsty type of regime, but people were arrested and kept in jail, etc. This certainly affected the whole atmosphere.

Q: So relations were almost at a standstill.

KORN: Yes.

Q: How was it dealing as Consul General and living with your staff in Calcutta which one always thinks of as being one of the most difficult places as far as seeing poverty, etc.

KORN: Very difficult psychologically, yes. The poverty that was there was overwhelming and the sights, sounds and smells were overwhelming as well. You couldn't go anywhere without seeing beggars, people mutilated, children with diseases, people living on the streets, and that sort of thing. Calcutta is a place that defies description really. It is an extraordinary city. There are many very interesting, intelligent people there. There is

a great culture there. But there is also the poverty there that leaves one absolutely speechless.

Q: Did you have a problem with morale at the post?

KORN: Most of the Westerners who lived there shielded themselves simply by trying to ignore the situation. You had to developed certain psychological defenses against it, otherwise you couldn't ... The Indians had their own cultural defenses against it—the philosophy that one is poor and miserable because of what one has done in a previous life so if you are a well-off Indian you obviously merited it. The situation does pose problems of adjustment for Westerners.

Q: You came back to Washington for a relatively short period in Policy Planning. Is that correct?

KORN: Yes. From '77 to '82, about five years.

Q: You were in Policy Planning for what, about two years?

KORN: A year. Actually I spent most of that year working with Roy Atherton when he was Assistant Secretary and then he became Ambassador-at-Large for the Middle East Peace negotiations, but I went with Roy on various trips. The Carter Administration had come in and launched the Middle East Peace effort.

Q: Did you look upon this as a professional having dealt with this before as a continuing of the Kissinger process or was this really a somewhat different approach?

KORN: This was something entirely different. Kissinger was step by step—you get a disengagement agreement, you go for another disengagement agreement. But Kissinger, if he had a vision of where this was going to end never shared it with any of his associates, much less the public. Kissinger never defined, he didn't really think that the Israelis were going to withdraw from all of Sinai and he wasn't going to press them to do so. In a way

what Carter did was a continuation, but in another way it was not. Because Kissinger was not trying for an overall solution. He was trying to calm things down perhaps to prepare the ground. But if he was preparing the ground, it was ground for something not as far reaching as Carter.

Q: What was your impression as you were there? You had obviously been dealing with the affairs and served in many of the countries. Did you feel that this was going anywhere or was this a bit naive?.

KORN: For those of us who had worked on the Arab-Israeli problem before it was really hard to imagine that Carter was going to achieve this goal of peace; an overall settlement that he announced. There seemed to be a great element of unreality to the policy discussions we would have. After a meeting with Roy Atherton and later on with Hal Saunders, we had discussions on how the agreement was going to be structured and I think I was not the only one who felt that this was really a kind of day dreaming exercise. There was so little reality to back it up. And it would have remained that way had not Sadat broken with the other Arabs and decided to go to Jerusalem and Carter was able to lead him little by little to accept the idea of a peace agreement now and not 20 years in the future. But if Sadat had not been willing to go all the way to break with the other Arabs this would not have occurred. The whole business of a Geneva Peace Conference was absolutely unrealistic. Carter for the first ten months of his presidency was going for just getting a conference to convene at Geneva. We were going to worry about what we do at Geneva after we got there. It was a desperate, unrealistic effort and would have collapsed right there if it had not been for Sadat.

Q: What was our analysis of why Sadat did this?

KORN: If you are asking me at the time, I would not be able to recall. I can give you an after the fact thought. Certainly Sadat had the view that Nasser had made a mistake in challenging the West and siding with the Soviet Union and that Nasser had brought great

ruin on Egypt through the '67 war and through the war of attrition that followed it. He felt that the way to bring Egypt out of its difficulties was to reach an agreement with Israel and to re-establish good relations with the West—that was where the money was and there is where prosperity would come, it would not come from the Soviet Bloc.

Q: Do you remember how we reacted when he first did this? This certainly wasn't in our game plan. Were we wondering where this was going to go? Was there general rejoicing?

KORN: Some of the people in NEA were not particularly happy with this. I myself was concerned at a certain point that Sadat was going further than he could afford to go. That he would be overthrown. And that the Peace Treaty that we were sponsoring and pushing very hard for after Camp David could end up getting Sadat thrown out. That did not happen. It happened later that got him assassinated. So there was that concern.

Q: You moved in '78 to Director of Israeli Affairs. Was that sort of right in the middle of the process?

KORN: The summer of '77 to the summer of '78 I was in Policy Planning and, of course, this was the time when, first of all, we were trying to get the Geneva Conference reconvened. The idea was to reach an overall settlement there. This proved impossible. Sadat made his speech and went to Jerusalem and immediately thereafter there began an effort to parley this visit to Jerusalem into something broader—basically into a peace agreement between Israel and Egypt. There was a conference in Cairo between the Israelis and Egyptians and all the other Arabs were invited but no one else came. Vance went out to Jerusalem and I went on this mission in January of 1978 for a meeting of what was called the Political Committee—in other words, sit down and try to lay out the terms for an agreement between Egypt and Israel. So, although I was not playing a leading role I was involved with what was going on—working with Atherton, Saunders, etc. I went to a conference that was held at Leeds, England in July of 1978—again between Israel, Egypt and the United States. All these were efforts that didn't really go very far.

After Sadat went to Jerusalem our effort was to build on it and make it into something. As Begin refused to make any serious concessions, the Egyptians became more and more disenchanted. Sadat was under increasing pressure from home and from other Arabs. The Saudis were offering him a lot of money to pull out of it. Finally in the late summer of 1978, Carter decided the thing was going to collapse unless he did something. He decided to go for broke. He sent Vance out again to the area, I went on this trip, to talk to Begin and then Sadat and invite them to come to Camp David. This was not announced until afterwards. After the trip was announced, Vance dispatched Atherton to Saudi Arabia and Jordan to explain to the governments there what the purpose was—what we hoped to accomplish at Camp David—and to try to get their support. I accompanied Atherton on this trip.

Q: Do you have any feeling how Begin felt about this proposal of Carter's?

KORN: Begin couldn't refuse the President of the United States inviting him to come to Camp David to talk with the Egyptian leader. His line, though, continued to be through all this that... It was clear that the Sinai didn't mean a hell of a lot to Begin and that that was basically a security issue and if security could be worked out there the Israelis would not quibble over it. The real problem was the West Bank and Gaza on the Palestinian side. There Begin was pretty much unyielding. He was ready to go so far as to say that Israel did not have sovereignty over these areas but his position was whenever the question of sovereignty came to be settled Israel would make its claim to sovereignty.

Q: How about the Egyptians? The Sinai was more interesting to them because of geography?

KORN: The remarkable thing on the Egyptian side was the extent that Sadat was dragging his advisers along with him. They were going kicking and screaming. They didn't want to go in that direction. The Foreign Minister, Mohammed Kamel, had several nervous breakdowns. Sadat sent him to Jerusalem in January of '78 for the Political Committee meeting and I remember the poor man remarking to me that he was in Jerusalem for two

or three days and didn't sleep the whole time because it made him so nervous the whole time to be there in an Israeli city. He broke into tears at the Leeds Conference in July of '78. Osama El-Baz was there and reminded me of Goebbels in his demeanor. All of them were just dead set against it but they had to go along. They did go along but at every stage they tried to torpedo the thing.

Q: Then you moved to Director of Israeli Affairs?

KORN: Yes, but things didn't change very much, I just moved into another office.

Q: How were we acting from our various embassies as things came in? Sam Lewis was our ambassador then. Was he a strong advocate of Israeli? Were we getting the same thing from Hermann Eilts in Cairo?

KORN: There wasn't much of that although obviously they were presenting various concerns. In my experiences this was one of the better groups...

Q: Was this sort of a feeling with say the professionals in the business of, "By gosh, although we didn't think it would happen with Sadat making this move, here it is and if there is ever going to be a chance this is it?"

KORN: Yes, I think so. The President was not only behind the effort but he was fully involved in it. So there was a feeling that you were participating in something important.

Q: Was there a unhappiness over the coincidence of having Sadat in Egypt but Begin in Israel? A feeling that had there been someone else there it might have moved a little bit better?

KORN: There were hopes, in some respects exaggerated and in some respects not so much, that Begin would turn out to be the person with whom you could make a deal. That he was strong enough. You know what one does in a situation like this when you are stuck with someone you don't particularly like you do your best to make him into the kind of

person you would like him to be. And that was basically how Begin was treated by the American side.

Q: How about the NSC in this? Did Brzezinski get involved in this at all or was this outside his purview?

KORN: Carter was the driving force in all of this and he would get up at 6:00 in the morning to read what the Egyptian Team had said that day. After Camp David he would bring the Egyptian and Israeli legal advisors together on some minor point that was still in disagreement. So, you get from that the picture of how much the President, himself was personally involved. Vance was his emissary and did all the talking. Brzezinski, I'm sure played some role, but Quandt was always a member of the team working with the State Department. Although Vance and Brzezinski had a very well-known rivalry, on the Middle East there was not a great deal of jockeying. I think this was because Carter was playing such a dominant role.

Q: Were you feeling a new power or ambition, whatever you want to call it, on your work as director of Israeli Affairs because of the increased importance of the Israeli lobby in the United States? You had been in and out of this whole business for a long time. Did you see this as an increasing factor—particularly in Congress? Or was it just a natural growth?

KORN: Well, there was no question that the Administration wanted to bring along with it the Israeli supporters and friends in this country. Carter was, of course, distrusted by what you call the Israeli lobby to some extent, but it was also the feeling that he was doing something that was very much in Israel's interest. So he was able to have their support in most cases. He had a good man in the White House, Al Roses [phonetic], who was the White House liaison with the Jewish community. Roses was very effective in bringing the Jewish community along.

Q: Outside the Camp David process, did you get any reflections from the situation in Israel from what happened in Iran with the Shah, etc. Were there any repercussions that particularly affected you?

KORN: The major thing after Camp David was the peace treaty, then we began working on the autonomy issues. There we ran into a stone wall. First of all, Carter had expended so much energy and time on the Middle East that when the peace treaty was finished he wanted to go on to do other things. He had many other things on his agenda and, at the very least, was fed up with all these difficult characters. The autonomy agreement was the other half of the Camp David framework. The peace treaty was one half, the autonomy agreement, the other half.

Q: Autonomy refers to the autonomy for the West Bank.

KORN: Yes, that there would be a autonomous, self-governing entity set up there. This was sketched out in the Camp David Accords, but there was a lot of filling in to be done. So first of all you had Carter out and you had the harder part of the Camp David Accords to put into effect. The peace treaty, although very difficult, came close not to be signed. It came very, very close to there not being a peace treaty. Still the peace treaty, by far, was the easier part because the Israelis saw the advantage of it—peace with Egypt would put the main Arab enemy out of commission. Dayan was transfixed by the idea that Israel and Egypt could be at peace. He brought Begin along. But when it came to the West Bank and Gaza the Israelis didn't want this. They figured the West Bank and Gaza would become very quickly an independent Arab state. Carter wasn't involved in pressing them. There were several meetings—Robert Strauss was there. He felt nobody resisted his charm. He spent two months on it and realized that he was way over his head. Then Linowitz was appointed and he was a much more savvy negotiator. But it dragged into the summer of '79 and then in 1980 which was an election year and the Israelis knew that in an election year there would be no serious pressure put on them. So the meetings just petered out. The one thing that was accomplished was the setting up of the Sinai Multinational Force.

Mike Sterner was the one who did the negotiating, I worked with him on it. Atherton was in Cairo by then. Saunders by that time was taken up almost entirely by the Iran situation and hostages. So Sterner took over the Multinational Force and I worked with him on that. That did get set up.

Q: One last thing on this. How about the situation in Lebanon at that time?

KORN: Well, Lebanon was not much of a concern of mine. Lebanon was in various stages of crisis, but I was not concentrating on it.

Q: But did you feel or those working with you feel that maybe we were paying too much, not just in money, but in capital, in order to bring the Israelis along? It was in there interest to do certain things. Were we over committing ourselves by being caught by tough bargainers?

KORN: We did build the bases, but Carter started off that we (inaudible). I think the feeling was that Carter held pretty much that principle.

Q: We are referring to Ambassador Korn's time in Ethiopia. One of the things I should mention is that Ambassador Korn wrote a book "Ethiopia, the United States and the Soviet Union," which was published by British publisher Croon Helm in 1986. It is a solid study of the time you were there as the Charg# from...what was the time...

KORN: June of '82 to July of '85.

Q: So we are going to be covering some of the things that weren't covered in that.

KORN: The main thing was that the Reagan Administration came in with the idea of roll-back. This applied to Ethiopia and one of the things was that the Reagan Administration took covert operation that had been begun on a very small scale under Carter and made it into an activity to be carried on inside of Ethiopia. Not a great threat to the government of Ethiopia. This was something I didn't believe could go undiscovered and tried to get

stopped. I was sure that given the surveillance the Ethiopian government exercised over us that this would be discovered. It was and the Agency officer who was involved, assigned to run it, was arrested along with all the poor Ethiopians who had been brought in to this activity by the Agency. The man was held for 40 days and beaten, kept in an unlighted cell most of the time, and kept on a restricted diet and interrogated, etc. Our main effort was concentrated on getting him out. The Ethiopians did not tell us they were holding him. At first I couldn't imagine that they were holding him because it seemed so naive. This was an accredited diplomatic officer and you just didn't hold officers. They seemed to have the idea that they could blackmail the United States over this and thus made certain demands. This is how we got confirmation that they were holding him. At that point we tried to find various ways that we could put pressure on them. One of the points was that we had agreed to sell the Ethiopian Airlines two Boeing 767s on which the Ethiopians had paid $20 million down on but the delivery was not scheduled until some months later. At one point the pressure was that we would keep the airplanes and the money too. The way it was worked out was that Mengistu finally came to realize that this was a game he couldn't win at. Reagan wrote him a letter clearly warning him that if this matter wasn't cleared up there would be serious consequences in our relations and offered to send Vernon Walters out to talk to him. So when Mengistu accepted Walters' visit we realized that this was going to be the way out. Walters came out. He was a very savvy operator—quite a showman; having dealt with many enormous egos and knowing how to flatter a leader and manipulate him. It was a very intense time. There were a lot of Ethiopians arrested.

Q: Did you have the feeling while you were there that we were on the right track? It must have been tempting to say, “Oh, the hell with this, is it worth keeping an embassy there”?

KORN: The main concern was that we were going to get involved with all the various regional insurgencies. I very much opposed that. There was constant temptation for the Reagan Administration to get involved with the Tigreans or the ELFs.

Q: ELFs [Eritrean Liberation Force]? Were the Eritreans more leftist than the left, or something?

KORN: Not so much. I think there was a general recognition that an independent Eritrea would really pose more problems for the United States than it would solve.

Q: How would that be?

KORN: If Eritrea becomes independent it has no resources whatsoever. It is an absolutely impoverished country. No government would accept the independence so you would have an Eritrean government who would turn anywhere for aid and assistance and being in perpetual war with Addis Ababa. So I think there was a realization that if we helped the Eritreans they might well succeed and then we really would have a problem. But there was constant temptation to get involved with the Tigreans who were much less a threat but who could weaken the government in Addis Ababa. My own feeling was that we should not get involved with these groups but should wait it out and see what happens.

Q: How about the role of the Israelis at this point?

KORN: The Israelis were delighted to be chosen the recipient of this information about the arrest of the Agency man. They came rushing in to Addis Ababa thinking they were going to play the role of savior by pulling the American chestnuts out of the fire and we would then have a great debt of gratitude towards them. But the Ethiopians didn't want to deal with them at all. They stayed a couple of days and then turned around and went home. The Israelis were carrying on a kind of clandestine relationship with the Ethiopians. It was one that they were buying. They very much wanted to have a presence, some influence in Ethiopia and Mengistu was playing on this. The Israelis would sell the Ethiopians various items of military hardware—not weapons at that time that I knew of, but communications, etc.—and the Ethiopians could not pay for them. There were also commercial ventures that the Ethiopians would not pay for. At one point the Israeli representative there who

was supposedly the representative of one of the major state-owned industries, became so discussed and discouraged with the whole thing that he just packed up and went back to Israeli. His bosses in Israeli sent him back.

Q: They were, as we have done, sort of buying there presence.

KORN: Yes. The one thing that they did get was overflight rights over Ethiopia. They could fly over at midnight, once a week on their way to South Africa.

Q: Did we get very much involved in efforts to get Ethiopian Jews out?

KORN: Well, the embassy got involved to a certain extend but most of them went out through the Sudan. That was where we got involved. The embassy did get involved with those who came through Addis Ababa and helped them to work with American organizations which came there to try to get them out. We got them visas—you had to have a visa for a foreign country in order to get out of Ethiopia. So once an American organization came and got the various other permissions we arranged with the Department to give them visas.

Q: Did you see a sort of a change during the time you were there under the Reagan Administration—one obviously having been burned with this one very minor operation of sort of learning that these were local problems and not to put everything in East-West terms?

KORN: The Reagan Administration never looked at things like that. [laughter] The Reagan Administration wanted to shut down the humanitarian aid program for Ethiopia. When it came in, the first think it did was to make a note to take out the CRS program for Ethiopia in the next year's budget. But we managed to get it kept in. When the big drought and famine came along, the Administration went much further then I think anyone expected it would in extending humanitarian assistance.

Q: You already had the infrastructure there...

KORN: Not for such a big program. No, the embassy supported CRS (Catholic Relief Service) and got grants from them. You are talking about 20,000 - 30,000 tons of food. In fall of 1989 it went up to the hundred of thousands of tons and the AID mission was established. Then CARE came and everyone else and his brother came in wanting to get a part of it.

Q: What was your feeling as you were there and had a chance to look at the situation about whether Ethiopia...?

KORN: Clearly Mengistu's regime was ruining the country. It was splitting it apart and causing it to fall further and further behind economically. At the time there didn't seem to be any solution to this. He was firmly whetted to the Soviets and the Soviets were whetted to him. He saw a military resolution to his problems. I left in the summer of 1985 and that was the way it looked.

Q: On your own part, did you say, Well, although maybe the Administration in power was also in a way seeing things in a military way....I mean who is with the Soviets and who isn't with the Soviets and all that. Did you see this as being a morass and let the Soviets get involved in it?

KORN: There was no way that the United States in short of accepting Mengistu's regime that we could hope to gain good relations with Mengistu at that point. But things changed afterwards. No, I felt it would be a mistake to get involved with the separatist movements and there were people in Washington who toyed with that idea.

Q: Did you get any emanations from the National Security Council which was being very activist in things like this?

KORN: The NSC was where the radicals who wanted to toy with the various secessionist groups were. But the NSC didn't really play a very big role in all this because... there were a bunch of unreasonable people in the NSC and throughout the Administration who wanted...

We did set up a public affairs program. My wife set it up and ran it. We had a great deal of trouble getting approval for this, because the initial reaction was that we wanted to do something favorable to the Ethiopian government. We wanted to re-establish the cultural relations with the individual Ethiopian which would undermine the stance of the Ethiopian Government so it took a while to ....

Q: Is there anything else that wasn't covered in your book?

KORN: No.

Q: I found the book a very interesting one. I take it this is what you did when you went to the Royal...when you got yourself a year at the Royal Institute and you wrote your book. Did you have a chance to sort of pick up some of the official British view but at a different level? Were you working with other seconded British foreign affairs officials?

KORN: It was a year's sabbatical during which I wrote a book. I went to a number of lectures and wrote articles...

Q: And that was what you did. Well then you were appointed as Ambassador to Togo from '86 to '88. How did this come about?

KORN: Well, Togo was what there was left after a certain number of other things went by the way. It was of no political or substantive interest. There was nothing of particular interest going on there.

Q: Was the dominant presence in Togo still the French?

KORN: Yes. They were pouring an enormous amount of money into the country. We had a small AID program as well. Then President Eyadema felt it was a good thing to hedge his bets on the French by having some Americans around. I always had plenty of access to him and he was always very friendly. There is nothing going on in Togo basically.

Q: How about United Nations vote?

KORN: ...at all small posts, as you well know, the main value of the host government is to get them to vote the right way at the United Nations.

Q: I interviewed somebody who was in Mali, I guess, and was saying that he had to go in and try to get support for a "save the whale" vote in the United Nations and had to start out by explaining what a whale was since it was a land locked country. He was assured that if a whale ever appeared up the Niger River they wouldn't kill it.

In a way things were going well and there were no particular problem?

KORN: Right.

Q: Were there any American business concerns?

KORN: We had an American who leased the government steel mill when it went broke and got it back into operation.

Q: Well, how did you spend your time?

KORN: (Inaudible). I decided to retire while there.

Q: Because at some of these posts "challenge" wasn't even a term.

KORN: Well, because of the nature of the regime people were not free to talk. You would have Togolese over and ask them the most harmless questions and they were afraid to talk.

Q: What type of regime was there?

KORN: It was a dictatorship. In many ways a benign dictatorship—it wasn't a bloody one. Eyadema didn't kill anybody unless he felt threatened. This never happened while I was there. People could be thrown in jail if on the wrong side of him and they could suffer materially. So not many people wanted to speak out. During the time I was there my wife was very active in promoting a local human rights organization. Eyadema got on this band wagon and the organization was actually set up and has been functioning since then. If I have to look back and think of a contribution that was made there that would probably be it.

Q: Just a final thing. How did you feel about the Foreign Service as a career?

KORN: That is hard to answer in a few words. It has advantages and attractions. I don't know if I would necessarily do it again. Maybe I would, it is hard to say. There are other things in life. It has changed a lot over the years. Certainly the Foreign Service today, I am not sure I would want to go in to. The one that I joined in 1957 I would.

Q: You also were fortunate with Ethiopia and the part you played in the peace process.

KORN: What I am referring to is the bureaucratization of the Foreign Service. When we entered the personnel system was a rather simple one and as the years passed it became more and more complex. Now it would be the admiration of some Byzantine....

Q: You really need to have a lawyer or agent to represent you when you enter.

KORN: To guide you through all of this. It has become so rigid and bureaucratic in so many ways. Not just the personnel system but the whole system of embassies, having to file reporting plans, etc. All this is fine in theory but what it promotes is people going around making busy work. You have to put something in the plan so you have to do it. That part of it probably would discourage me now from going in if I had to start all over again.

Q: I think this is not an uncommon reaction. Well, I want to thank you very much.

KORN: Thank you.

End of interview